

Listening to Illinois veterans and advocating on their behalf in Washington, Rep. Debbie Halvorson (IL-11) questioned senior Department of Veterans Affairs officials yesterday and received an update that the VA is interested in moving forward in establishing a veterans health facility at Silver Cross Hospital's soon to be vacated Joliet location, though a final decision has not yet been made.

At a House Veterans Affairs committee hearing on Thursday, Halvorson questioned Secretary of Veterans Affairs General Eric Shinseki and Acting Undersecretary for Health Dr. Gerald Cross. Cross acknowledged Halvorson's efforts to bring the facility to the attention to the VA, and noted in his testimony that though no final decision has been made, the facility is actively being considered to meet needed services expansion in the region. Cross noted that the VA recently sent an initial evaluation team, and is sending a full assessment team later this month.

"Fighting for our veterans and making sure they have the best access to care is a huge priority for me," said Halvorson. "Bringing a veterans health facility to Silver Cross would make quality health care more accessible in my district and the region - and our veterans deserve that. I have met with Secretary Shinseki several times and have brought House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Filner (CA) to our district to visit the facility. Though a deal to establish Silver Cross's Joliet location as a VA facility is not finalized, yesterday's comments by both Secretary Shinseki and Acting Under Secretary Cross are very encouraging, and I will continue to fight until a plan is finalized to bring improved veterans services to our region."

During the hearing, Halvorson also questioned Shinseki and Cross on a variety of other topics, including the VA's backlog of cases, which Shinseki said the VA was making progress addressing.

As the only member from Illinois on the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Congresswoman Halvorson has been a strong advocate for military families and veterans. In her first year in office, Halvorson introduced and fought for several pieces of legislation aimed at helping wounded veterans and military families, including the *Families of Disabled Veterans Work Opportunity Act*, HR 3908, and the *Wounded Warrior Caregiver Assistance Act*, HR 2898.

A video of the hearing can be found [here](#).

A transcript of Halvorson's exchange with Shinseki and Cross is below.

Transcript of House Veterans Affairs Committee Hearing

February 4, 2010

CONGRESSWOMAN HALVORSON: Thank you Mr. Chairman and thank you Mr. Secretary for being here. I too want to reiterate that if you are doing anything with regards to state veteran's homes somewhere else, I would like to know about it. I have two of them, Manteno and LaSalle, both in Illinois, in my district, that I too want to make sure and keep up on and do something about. I also want to thank you for working out a date with my staff, and I know we continue to do that, so you can come to the district, which you have agreed to do sometime in March, so that you can see first-hand the issues of the veterans that are going on and the things and I would be remiss if I didn't talk about Silver Cross Hospital in Joliet. And if I could get an update I would love to hear from Dr. Cross or somebody with regards to what is going on with the medical facility in my district.

SECRETARY SHINSEKI: Dr. Cross.

DR. GERALD CROSS: Congresswoman thank you so much for your support and for working with us on this very important issue in Illinois. We have a CBOC there and it's about a hundred miles as I understand from Hines VA, that's quite a distance, and we think that that CBOC needs to be expanded. We are very interested in the proposal, that I think you have been very instrumental in, in regard to a possible option in regard to Silver Cross Hospital, or a portion of it. And what we are doing is our engineers at Hines VA have already been out taking a look. There's a construction staff at the headquarters VA here in Washington is momentarily getting ready to send this month a further assessment team out to look at it again. But I wanted assure you Congresswoman that we are interested. We think that this is a possible option for us, no final decision has been made yet, but we are moving forward.

CHAIRMAN FILNER: Would the gentle-lady yield for one minute.

CONGRESSWOMAN HALVORSON: Absolutely.

CHAIRMAN FILNER: I have been to that facility. Mr. Secretary there are several buildings around the country, this one is one, there happens to be one in San Diego, but I'm sure there are others, that may have outlived their usefulness for a given purpose but can fit in very nicely with your announced and wonderful policy of zero homelessness in 5 years. And it seems to me, those buildings, a hospital building, viewed as a shelter for those who are now homeless not only has medical facilities, has private rooms, has you know space for all kinds of other social service support, would seem to be a very cost effective way, and they're generally in places that we don't have the NIMBY reaction to that. So, I would see this not just as a isolated use of a surplus building but as a method to really get at, because you know Mr. Secretary how tough it is to build a facility even for thirty homeless, and to get the local permits, and to get the zoning and all that stuff. Seems to me we have some perfect places that could really help your...the plan that you have announced so I hope it would be seen in a very wide context, not just as a surplus building whether we need it or not, and I thank Miss Halvorson for taking the leadership on that. I yield back.

CONGRESSWOMAN HALVORSON: I do appreciate the time you have taken, and it's very very important to our district because of the traffic and the amount of veterans that are in the area right there that that would serve, so you know I appreciate your diligence so that I don't have to keep making it a top priority for you also.

SECRETARY SHINSEKI: We're happy to follow up Congresswoman, and I would in response to your comment and the Chairman's also, we are taking a strategic look at all of our facilities, we have 5,300 facilities in the system, and also looking at what's available to right size our footprint as we look ten years in the future, where we think veterans are going to be, long term care, homelessness, how do we accommodate all this. So we are happy to take a look at a facility like that.